

The Russian Threat to Security in the Baltic Sea Region

Kalev Stoicescu

In the space of 15 years, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, Russia's relationship with the Western world has made the journey from difficult partnership to outright confrontation. Russia's hostility towards the West has deep implications for security and defence in the transatlantic area in general, and in the Nordic–Baltic region in particular. We now face a grim new reality, a change of climate rather than temporary bad weather, to which we must adapt quickly and effectively. NATO and EU nations must step from reactive to proactive policies and practical measures in order to prevent explosive tensions and provocations or even Russian aggression against allies in the Baltic Sea region. Unfortunately, such dark scenarios no longer belong to the realms of fantasy. President Putin has demonstrated that the unthinkable is actually thinkable.

The Western nations abide by the international agreements that constitute the basis of the post-Cold War European security architecture. They respect liberal democratic values and the right of any other nations to embrace these values, as well as their freedom to choose by themselves their own political, economic and cultural affiliation. In this sense, the West could not avoid “provoking” the resurgent and assertive Russia, most notably in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. The overall confrontation became inevitable, given Russia's domestic transformation into a militaristic autocracy with overly ambitious foreign-policy goals that vehemently opposes the Western world and shows aggressiveness against neighbouring countries.

The Kremlin's propaganda machine accuses the West, especially the US, of having provoked and sustained a political, economic and ideological “crusade” to force Russia to its knees and overthrow Putin's authoritarian regime. Numerous politicians, business leaders and opinion formers seem to buy this narrative, and blame Western governments for unnecessarily interfering in Russia's “backyard”. They are convinced, or just pretend to believe, that Russia may and should be appeased, at the expense of countries like Ukraine and Georgia, for the sake of peace, big business and natural gas. This narrative is supposed to exploit Western pacifism and fear of war to the maximum, and to induce a spirit of indulgence and compromise towards Russia's policies and actions.

Against this background, it is essential to study Russia's strategic interests in the Baltic Sea area, and clarify the Kremlin's potential readiness to use military might as well as political, economic and propaganda tools of power in order to fulfil its aims. On the other hand, a political and military assessment of Western

nations concerned by the Russian threat should clarify their willingness and capacity to deter Russia and prevent a violent conflict in the Baltic Sea region. The final aim of this analysis is to present some conclusions on the essence of the Russian threat, and recommendations on how to deal with it.

Russia's Regional Interests, Anxieties and Historic Obsessions

The Nordic–Baltic region is strategically important to Russia for several historical and geopolitical reasons, but also for military and economic ones. It is the only region where Russia has direct contact with the West. In the past 20 years, all other littoral countries have become members of NATO and/or the EU, thus reducing Russia's potential to dominate the Baltic Sea region much more drastically than occurred in the Black Sea area. It is therefore fair to assume that President Putin will not miss any promising – even if risky – opportunities to take advantage of Western political divisions and military weakness in order to regain, as much as possible, the regional upper hand. He didn't pass up the opportunity to grab Crimea and change the security environment in the Black Sea theatre.

Over the past millennium, Russia has constantly struggled to expand onto, and gradually occupy and control, the entire eastern coast of the Baltic Sea, which it considers a natural extension of its heartland. Russia has always been obsessed with access to, and domination of, the “warm seas” – the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea – by possessing ice-free ports and powerful fleets. Peter, followed by Catherine, both “Great” czars, opened imperial Russia's “windows” to these seas. Thereafter, the Bolsheviks drew iron curtains for many decades to maintain Soviet regional supremacy. However, post-Cold War Russia largely lost control over these “windows”, including some important naval bases that hosted the Russian fleets. Ironically, the Baltic coastal nations that Russia subjugated for centuries (the Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians and Poles) or decades (eastern Germans) are now fully anchored in the Western world, whereas Russia has been left with only the bottom of the Gulf of Finland around Saint Petersburg, and the northern part of former Eastern Prussia (Kaliningrad oblast), an exclave that had never been mastered by the Russians before the end of WWII. The Russians have not forgotten these historical events, and Putin's propaganda can easily strike the chords of popular nostalgic resentment.

The Kaliningrad oblast, like Crimea, is a sombre example of Russian mismanagement and anti-Western paranoia. These micro-regions are really nothing more than Russian military outposts, armed to the teeth and threatening neighbouring nations with *Iskander* ballistic missiles, amphibious assault vessels and naval infantry brigades etc., despite having ideal conditions for the development of tourism and free trade. To make matters worse, both these exclaves are a heavy financial burden and a logistical nightmare for Russia, in terms of transportation, delivery of supplies etc. In addition, Russia may feel that Kaliningrad oblast is, in fact, no more than a WWII trophy to which it has rather slim historical rights, and which must therefore be particularly

strongly defended (especially if the Kremlin looks upon Western perceptions and intentions according to its own spoiling, keeping Crimea in mind).

Up north, Saint Petersburg is Russia's second-largest city, with a population equal to that of Finland, or a bit smaller than those of the three Baltic States combined. The former czarist capital is, together with Moscow, Russia's shop-window display, and its main financial and economic hub. Around 60% of Russia's total maritime exports, mainly energy shipments, pass across the Baltic Sea, principally through the newly built ports of Primorsk and Ust Luga, in addition to Saint Petersburg.

Last but not least, Russia has also spread its natural gas tentacles along the bottom of the Baltic Sea, from the former Finnish province of Viipuri to Greifswald in Germany. The Nord Stream pipelines that by-pass the "troublesome" Baltic States and Poland not only provide valuable political and economic leverage vis-à-vis Germany, the Netherlands and other Western countries, but are also a strategic asset that Moscow deems necessary to protect by military means (even if it remains unclear against whom).¹ In addition, the importance of the Danish straits for Russian oil exports should not be underestimated. The Kattegat and Skagerrak have become the world's third most important chokepoint for global oil exports (after the Hormuz and Malacca straits),² and Russian exports are expected to increase in the future, especially in the light of low oil prices and the need to make full use of the newly built ports in the Gulf of Finland.

Why and How Might Russia Intervene in the Baltic Sea Region?

There are a number of reasons – which should not be underestimated – for Russia to attempt to reinstate forcefully its domination over the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea and the whole region. First, as a matter of principle, for the historical and practical reasons discussed above, Russia will not accept indefinitely the present reality in which:

- it cannot exercise significant political and economic influence over any other countries around the Baltic Sea, considering the Baltic States and Poland in particular to be "unfriendly", and fearing the eventual accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO;
- it has been left with only two small sections (about 960 km, or 7% in total)³ of the entire Baltic Sea coastline, and only two naval harbours – Baltiysk and Kronstadt – which are about 1,100 km away from each other via international shipping lanes and air corridors. Russia pretends to feel politically and militarily squeezed out of the region;
- it has to spend excessively on the defence and supply of the Kaliningrad exclave, a region that is over-militarised, economically unattractive to foreign investments, underdeveloped and not self-sustainable.⁴

There are certainly no Gerhard Schröders, Silvio Berlusconi or Victor Orbáns in power in any countries in the Nordic–Baltic region. Moreover, Russia is neither a crucial trade partner nor an investor of critical importance in these countries, in order to be able to manipulate them by economic means.⁵

However, the present Russian leadership, and especially President Putin, is certainly expecting the chance to administer a humiliating and politically crippling blow to both NATO and the EU, in order to seriously undermine Western solidarity, prestige and credibility. Such a move, if successful, would undoubtedly strengthen Russia's bid to restore its domination in the region.

Most security-policy observers point towards the Baltic States as being appealing and convenient for the Kremlin, and therefore Russia's most probable target of choice. The main rationale for Russia's possible actions, especially against Latvia and Estonia, is centred on the non-indigenous inhabitants of these countries. The question is whether Narva and/or Daugavpils are most likely to be the next trouble spots, where Russia might eventually provoke turbulence and violence, and thereafter exploit increasing destabilisation. That seems to be the easiest and most tempting, as well as a "justifiable" avenue of Russian intervention in the region, but heavily Russian-populated areas in eastern Estonia and Latvia are not really NATO's Achilles' heel. While there are certainly hundreds or perhaps thousands of Russians (especially citizens of the Russian Federation) who Moscow might try to mobilise quickly to become a destabilising fifth column within these countries, the vast majority of the population of Narva and Daugavpils would hardly be likely to join or support them. Many local Russians may share discontent with the policy and performance of the respective national governments (as do many Estonians and Latvians, by the way, which is quite normal in a democratic society) or perhaps feel somehow alienated (i.e. uncomfortable, because of not having integrated well into local society); but they certainly appreciate their relatively high standard of living in Estonia and Latvia, and their personal and collective freedoms. Russia may not have a better choice or course of action, but eastern Estonia and Latvia are by no means comparable to the Donbas. In this context, Russia's only promising instrument, besides limited effects achievable through propaganda and cyber-attacks, is the military machine.

Political and Military Assessment of Western Nations Concerned by the Russian Threat in the Baltic Sea Area

The members of NATO and the EU geographically situated in the Baltic Sea region or which have a strong interest for and impact on its security and defence can be seen as a cluster of distinct groups, in spite of their common status of allies, backed by very close political, economic and cultural ties, and solidarity pledges under Article V of the Washington Treaty and/or the EU's "solidarity clause" (Article 222 of the Treaty of Lisbon). First, these countries are divided into (a) main contributors to or guarantors of collective defence and (b) much smaller and most exposed allies that need to be defended. The groups also differ to a certain degree in their political approaches towards Russia and

perceptions of the Russian threat, as well as willingness to increase conventional military deterrence and collective defence efforts in the Nordic–Baltic area.

The Baltic States and Poland, members of both NATO and the EU, speak with almost the same voice. Together with the “Anglo-Saxons” (especially the US) and occasionally the Scandinavians, they have been repeatedly pinpointed by the Kremlin as Russia’s fiercest opponents, to be “blamed” for actively promoting European and transatlantic solidarity and firmness, which took shape in Western sanctions against Russia following the illegal occupation and annexation of Crimea, as well as NATO’s assurance and adaptation defensive measures, following the Alliance’s summit in Wales. The four neighbouring allies are clearly the most exposed, all being in direct contact with Russia’s Western Military District, including the westernmost militarised outpost in the Kaliningrad oblast. Latvia, Lithuania and Poland also share borders with Russia’s closest ally, Belarus, which, while not a Baltic littoral country, plays a very significant role in the Nordic–Baltic security equation.⁶ These countries are among the few exemplary NATO allies that spend 2% of their GDP on defence, but their armed forces could not long withstand a Russian invasion on their own.

The four frontline allies have therefore persistently demanded a significant increase in allied forces on their territories (“boots on the ground”), far beyond the present rather limited level. The recently inaugurated Polish president, Andrzej Duda, paid his very first official visit to Tallinn, on the symbolic date of 23 August,⁷ and, together with Estonia’s political leaders, urged NATO powers to “locate permanent bases on the Alliance’s eastern borders”.⁸ President Toomas Hendrik Ilves emphasised on that occasion that Estonia considered Poland “the leader of regional security cooperation”,⁹ especially in the light of NATO’s forthcoming summit in Warsaw (8–9 July 2016). On the other hand, Poland has repeatedly stressed its close ties with the Baltic States and – possessing far larger military forces – its readiness to assume increased responsibility for their defence. The area from the Gulf of Finland to the Tatra Mountains in southern Poland, including key areas in the Baltic Sea, constitutes NATO’s first military line of defence (but, politically, also the last), a cohesive and critical sub-region for contingency planning and force (pre)positioning by the Alliance. Poland and the Baltic States are very serious about investing in their armed forces and strengthening collective defence, and they ask all other NATO allies to follow their example.¹⁰

EU members but “non-aligned”, **Finland** and **Sweden** are stepping inch by inch closer to NATO militarily, although both are still far from making the ultimate political decision to join the Alliance. While Finland is evidently much more exposed, sharing a 1,340-km border with Russia, Sweden also has certain vulnerabilities, especially considering the strategically located island of Gotland. Both these countries have been annoyed by Russian military activity,¹¹ like virtually all other nations in the region, in an evident attempt by Moscow to test their reactions and readiness to defend themselves, but also – most importantly – to intimidate and warn them of the consequences of even

thinking out loud about joining NATO. It seems, however, that the Finnish and Swedish political elites are not excessively worried about Russia's reaction, in particular by a worst-case scenario of direct military retaliation by the Kremlin. That is perhaps the least probable scenario, which is well understood by leading politicians in Helsinki and Stockholm, given that nothing really happened (along these lines) in the 11 years following the admission of the Baltic States to the Alliance. Their concern seems to be that NATO membership, while decisively strengthening the much-weakened self-defence capabilities of Finland and Sweden, brings with it the inevitable responsibility to participate in the defence of the front-line allies, the Baltic States and Poland (while Finland would itself become a major front-line state), making it impossible – even theoretically – to stay out of a regional conflict. The president of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, clearly implied in a recent speech that Finland does not have any responsibilities to stand for the security of the Baltic States.¹² In a “politically correct” NATO context (but not so much in the EU), this was no more than stating the obvious, although it was sufficient to provoke a chain of rather predictable media distortions in Russia to the effect that Finland cannot even defend itself, let alone others.¹³ On the other hand, leading (socialist) Swedish politicians have gone even further in arguing about the inappropriateness of joining NATO, given that Stockholm has (arguably) solid bilateral defence relationships and guarantees, especially from the US, which makes the prospect of Alliance membership futile.¹⁴ As a result, the Swedish minister of defence, Peter Hultqvist, had to visit Washington again, in order to “increase defence-related cooperation” with the US.¹⁵ It is hard to imagine the consequences of a (theoretical) public statement by the American president addressed or hinting to Finland and Sweden along the same “politically correct” lines used by president Niinistö in respect of the Baltic States.

Norway and **Denmark** are at a slightly more protective distance from the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea, but certain important things are unchanged: Norway borders Russia in the Far North and it is on the edge of the Russian Northern Fleet's exit to the Atlantic Ocean, while the strategic Danish straits are to be primarily defended by all three Scandinavian countries. Denmark's Achilles' heel in the Baltic is the island of Bornholm, against which the Russians simulated an attack in 2014 while the island was being visited by many Danish politicians and journalists for an annual political meeting.¹⁶ The allied descendants of the Vikings are generally openly supportive of Polish and Baltic defence aspirations, just as Iceland has always been, while their strategic role has increased since NATO's enlargement in 2004, given the need to provide support for air and maritime operations well beyond their shorelines in the Baltic Sea area.

The **United States** is the crucial Western player and ultimate guarantor of stability and peace in the Nordic–Baltic region. The previously described three “clusters” of NATO and/or EU members that are most vulnerable and in need of solid military support are unmistakably primarily Washington-oriented. The **United Kingdom**, traditionally America's closest political and military ally, is expected by the Nordic, Baltic and Polish nations to contribute rapidly and significantly to the US-led ranks in the event of a regional crisis. “America first”

has repeatedly proved to be the actual scenario of crisis response, before other allies (not necessarily all) are politically and militarily ready to intervene in a conflict situation. Thus, the main issue is the interest of the White House, and Downing Street, in supporting and if necessary defending Poland and the Baltic States at any cost, in order to preserve NATO's and their own integrity and credibility. President Barack Obama visited Tallinn in September 2014, on the eve of NATO's summit in Wales, and conveyed the strongest possible message of American solidarity and determination to defend its allies in the Baltic region. The US has raised the Stars and Stripes from Estonia to Romania, deploying a few infantry companies here and a few fighter jets there, but not yet the level of forces that – coupled with contributions by other allies – might successfully counter a surprise Russian attack. The UK may be able to complement US forces, first of all, with naval assets that are actually badly needed to stop Russia believing that the Baltic Sea is virtually its own exclusive comfort zone.

The US [Secretary of Defense, Ashley Carter](#), the [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford](#), and the recently retired [Chief of Staff of the Army, General Raymond Odierno](#), agree that Russia represents a significant threat to the United States and its allies. So does NATO's top military commander (SACEUR), General Philip Breedlove. However, decisions of the highest importance in critical moments are made at the White House. Even though a Russian attack against a NATO ally is a rather different issue than Russia's continued aggression against Ukraine, one should keep in mind that the decision to offer Ukraine legitimate lethal self-defence aid has passed through all relevant US authorities to the very top, but has been on hold for months, pending final approval by President Obama. This decision may be, of course, ultimately enforced if Russia escalates the situation in the Donbas and tries to extend occupied territories. It is also worth mentioning that only the "Anglo-Saxons" (the US, the UK and Canada) have so far deployed military instructors to Ukraine, in order to train that country's armed formations for self-defence.

However, with US presidential elections approaching in 2016, President Obama will soon be leaving office after two terms. Apart from the rather eccentric Donald Trump, most presidential candidates that seem to have a chance and have spoken out on European security issues, e.g. Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush, strongly support the idea of increasing the American military presence in the Baltic States and Poland, offering more substantial aid (possibly weapons) to Ukraine, and standing firm against Russia's imperialist policy in its neighbourhood. Issues concerning NATO solidarity and enlargement have almost always enjoyed bipartisan support on Capitol Hill, which means that next year's election will most probably not change the American political orientation to strengthen the defence of its allies in the Baltic–Nordic region.

There are two other major Western protagonists on the Baltic Sea area security scene: **Germany** and **France**. These powerful allies are serious about NATO's collective defence, having participated actively in regional joint exercises, the Baltic Air Policing mission etc. However, they can hardly be expected to take the lead in a critical situation, i.e. to deploy preventively significant forces to

Poland and the Baltic States, before an emerging crisis unfolds into a military conflict. France and Germany have played and continue to play the leading political role vis-à-vis Russia with regard to Georgia and Ukraine, as Moscow's most (perhaps only) suitable Western counterparts, while the US is the "elephant in the room" (e.g. in the Minsk process). However, such scenarios cannot simply be replicated or even vaguely imitated in the Nordic-Baltic region, where there are no "outsiders", only NATO and/or EU members. Poland and the Baltic States expect Germany and France to be more active in beefing up the defence of the Alliance, and not to regard them as mere buffer states. Why not strengthen properly (to achieve rapid reaction capability) and deploy (let's say under the EU banner, but under NATO command) the Franco-German Brigade to Poland and the Baltics? It currently stands idle and lacks a clear vision and purpose for the future, instead of being located and used where it is critically needed. The almost clinically dead CSDP¹⁷ would also get an invigorating fresh breath, not to speak of EU-NATO defence cooperation.

Germany's long-standing chancellor, Angela Merkel, appears to have no illusions about Russia's foreign policy and intentions. She is likely to run successfully for a fourth term in 2017, and continue as the leading political figure in Germany and Europe. This is not a good prospect for President Putin, because no potential Schröders are looming on the horizon and Merkel has taken an increasingly tough position towards Moscow, in spite of internal pressure from *Verstehers* of Russia such as foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier or major German companies, which are losing lucrative business in Russia. The French president, François Hollande, may not be re-elected in 2017, but that will hardly make a big difference in the context of this research paper, given Germany's leading role. Last but not least, history leaves fingerprints that continuously affect politics. France and Germany are the two Western powers that have invaded Russia, and even if those events occurred long ago and anything similar would be unthinkable in the future, these historical episodes are still remembered and eventually recalled by Russia, while they are equally traumatic for the French and Germans, who still share a sense of guilt.

Summing up these considerations, it seems very probable that the political leadership and/or the main foreign and security policy features of the protagonists, in this context, will most likely remain unchanged until 2017 or even several years beyond. It is impossible to predict exceptional political changes due to the US presidential elections and the UK's referendum on EU membership in 2016, or even the German parliamentary elections in 2017. The same goes, without saying, for a sudden change of leadership and political direction in Moscow, in spite of numerous opinions indicating the beginning of the end or the agonising decay of Putin's regime. President Putin now seems prepared to send his "little green men" and "humanitarian aid" to Syria, to save the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and also to send a strong message to the West: it is premature to write Russia off in general, and in the Middle East in particular, where the Kremlin stands ready to defend its ally and to fill the vacuum left by the US¹⁸ (having enough political influence, also vis-à-vis Iran and Iraq, and military capabilities to deploy its forces at such a strategic distance, far from its borders). The situation in the Nordic-Baltic area is for

now, of course, quite the opposite to that of Syria and eastern Ukraine, where war is going on and the context is very different. But one should not ignore the fact that Russian and Western interests collide equally in all these regions.

In military terms, NATO planners and commanders have difficult tasks ahead of them. The Kaliningrad oblast is an ideal outpost for creating a strategically important anti-access/area-denied zone¹⁹ deep into the airspace of Poland and the Baltic States, as well as in the south-eastern corner of the Baltic Sea. Russia has repeatedly rehearsed, in large-scale “snap” exercises, the separation of the Baltic States from the rest of NATO’s territory (most obviously through land operations linking the Kaliningrad oblast to Belarus, in addition to naval, air and air defence operations). Common wisdom would suggest that the Kaliningrad oblast has to be militarily neutralised by NATO in the early hours of a serious conflict, and Belarus has to be somehow kept out of the action (even if this looks quite improbable, as Russia will certainly invade its ally to make use of its territory).

Conclusions and recommendations

Russia is plainly resentful and openly hostile. It still feels the bitter loss of previously occupied nations and territories in the Baltic Sea region. The Kremlin’s leaders are particularly irritated by the successful development of the Baltic States and Poland, their American orientation in defence, and their determination to prevent by all means any repetition of the tragedy of 1939. On the other hand, Russia is exasperated by the prospect of Sweden and Finland joining NATO, which would be a serious game-changer in the region. Russia’s political, economic and military actions against these countries (e.g. sharp criticism of the policies on national minorities in Estonia and Latvia or the emerging debate over NATO membership in Sweden, the repeated violation of the air and maritime space of Sweden, Finland and the Baltic States etc.) are clearly provocative and incompatible with the aim of keeping the Baltic Sea region continuously stable and peaceful.

The Kremlin’s traditional methods for influencing “unfriendly” neighbours are provocation, aggression and frozen conflicts. Moscow’s political attitude implies that Russia cannot feel comfortable, most likely threatened, if its neighbours seek to strengthen their security and defence. The better prepared Russia’s small neighbours are to defend themselves (especially in the context of NATO), the more Russia feels “threatened”. Georgia and Ukraine were relatively easy prey for Moscow, even if Russia hasn’t achieved its end goals in either case. Russia’s Baltic and Nordic neighbours are NATO and/or EU members, and therefore greatly superior in terms of collective defence capabilities. However, would that make a difference for President Putin if he decides that the best or only way to fulfil Russia’s “vital interests” in our region, to weaken the West and regain “respect” is to create a *fait accompli* destabilising situation or a frozen conflict? The Kremlin seems to believe that ending/resolving frozen conflicts on Russia’s periphery and restoring the territorial integrity of its neighbours equates to losing control and offering them a one-way ticket to the West. Moscow therefore considers the creation and

continuance of frozen conflicts to be an indispensable instrument of power. Nevertheless, the more Russia continues to act in this way, the more it alienates (all) its European neighbours and makes them feel increasingly insecure.

The Russian threat is real. The Kremlin's statements that Russia does not threaten neighbouring NATO/EU allies simply do not match the reality. Russia continues to intensify the modernisation of its armed forces, regularly conducts planned but unannounced massive military exercises in the Baltic–Nordic region, and deploys its most capable troops and weapons westwards. The Russian armed forces can at any moment turn a large snap exercise in the Baltic Sea area into military aggression, as it did in the case of Crimea. An attempt at “neo-conquest” by subversion and bribery, rather than by military force, may be Russia's first choice, but destabilising provocations or outright aggression cannot be ruled out, given Vladimir Putin's record since August 2008. The Russian president would undoubtedly not hesitate to administer NATO (and the EU) a politically humiliating and devastating blow if he had the chance and if it was worth the risk. Russia will always find a pretext, if necessary, whatever the countries in the Baltic Sea region actually do (or do not do).

No countries in the Baltic Sea area are safe. It is pure illusion to assume that in the case of Russian aggression against e.g. Poland and/or the Baltic States, some other countries in the region, most notably non-NATO Finland and Sweden, would be able to stay out of the conflict.²⁰ The Kremlin tries to keep the non-aligned Nordics out of the Alliance both by asking them to stick to their “neutrality” (which Moscow would hardly respect in a crisis situation, given that it doesn't do so even in peacetime), and by threatening them with “adequate measures”. The fact that Finland and Sweden are not (yet) included directly in NATO's defence planning and force posture and are not part of the Alliance's collective defence is clearly favourable only to Russia. Moscow, and seemingly also the Finnish president, seems to forget that in addition to NATO's Article V there is also Article 222 of the Lisbon Treaty, which together cement the collective security and defence of NATO and EU members, including by non-military means. Last but not least, Sweden and Finland should join the North Atlantic Alliance sooner, to improve their own defence and that of their neighbours, rather than later, trying desperately and unsuccessfully to stay out of a conflict which their NATO membership could have largely prevented.

Russia's window of opportunity is closing. The Kremlin seems to think that it has certain political and military advantages vis-à-vis NATO in the Baltic Sea region. The overall military posture from the Barents Sea to Central Europe is continuously and clearly in Russia's favour, given the rather symbolic presence of allied ground and air (defence) forces in the Baltic States and Poland, the occasional allied naval and coastal activities in the Baltic Sea (quite modest compared to the size of the Russian Baltic Fleet and its exercises), and the downgraded self-defence capabilities of Finland and Sweden. On the other hand, Russia counts on its political determination and swift decision-making compared to the rather slow and somewhat indecisive NATO/EU. In addition, the Kremlin does not refrain from emphasising Russia's readiness to bear far

more sacrifices, in contrast to the West's predominantly avoid-war-at-all-costs attitude.

However, time is not running in the Kremlin's favour, because Russia's economy is heading for collapse, if oil prices do not increase unexpectedly, and even the faith of ordinary Russians in their almighty czar might be shaken, considering their rapidly deteriorating living standards. Furthermore, the defence of the easternmost NATO allies is constantly being improved, which represents for Russia a more and more difficult challenge for the future. Russia cannot afford simply to wait for Europe to collapse, due to the present mass migration or other problems, in order to take decisive action in the direction of the Baltic. In addition, Ukraine is Moscow's most urgent foreign-policy issue, because the present situation and future prospects of that country are far from satisfactory for Russia. Moscow may therefore realise that, in fact, it now has a unique window of opportunity – narrowing with each passing month – to act, rather than a longer timeframe in which to destabilise Ukraine little by little, implement its program of military modernisation, and watch Europe crumble politically and the transatlantic link deteriorate etc. The next moment of truth will be in late 2015 and early 2016, when assessments and decisions will be made concerning the implementation of the Minsk agreements and the future of occupied Donbas, as well as the prolongation of EU sanctions.

How to stop Putin? The easiest answer is not to allow him to achieve his goals in Ukraine and Georgia. That would keep him busy over there, and – most importantly – prove that his aggressive and anti-Western approach will not be successful, notwithstanding certain tactical victories. In fact, Crimea and the Donbas, unlike occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia, have turned out to be Pyrrhic victories for Putin from an international political and economic perspective, not to mention having “awakened” NATO to start beefing up the defence of its most vulnerable members. In this sense, Moscow's success or failure with regard to Ukraine will be indirectly reflected in Russia's behaviour in the Baltic Sea region.

It seems that, in the present situation of a “phony peace” somehow holding in eastern Ukraine, the US and other major allies are only prepared to take small symbolic steps (e.g. the rotational deployment of US mechanised infantry companies) and shows of military force (e.g. the recent visit by American F-22 Raptors), rather than to deploy significant forces to Poland and the Baltic States. Russia is, of course, an important player in other areas too, e.g. Iran and Syria, which are tremendously important issues both for the US (a non-nuclear Iran and stability in the Gulf) and Europe (immigration). However, it would be wrong to assume that Russia is not actively engaging in an informal anti-Western coalition in the Middle East, together with Syria and Iran, and potentially Iraq. That said, there is sufficient reason to believe that the rather humble steps taken by NATO allies, instead of enhanced measures to improve decisively the defence of Baltic Sea allies, actually do not and cannot affect positively Russia's policy in the Middle East – or in Ukraine, for that matter. A policy of appeasement and restraint (to accommodate Russia's “worries”) doesn't work with Putin, any more than it did with another dictator, in Munich

in 1938. On the other hand, significantly stronger defensive measures by NATO, as well as the eventual accession of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance, are the only way to preserve peace and avoid potential Russian aggression in the Nordic–Baltic area. Western reluctance to take these steps will send the wrong message to Moscow and offer Russia an invitation to act.

The Baltic States and Poland will each have to be provided with an allied land forces brigade (perhaps two mechanised and two heavy armoured), to be reinforced by the Multinational Corps Northeast, based in Szczecin, as a rapid reaction force. In addition, the allies will need to deploy a full squadron of fighter aircraft in each of the Baltic States and Poland, provide additional close- and medium-range air-defence capabilities, and assign the necessary special operations forces. The allied naval presence in the Baltic Sea needs to be permanent and at a sufficient level of deterrence and protection of allied forces. Such steps may seem for many observers to be fantastic or even provocative towards Russia, tantamount to a declaration of war or preparation for invasion. However, if we take a closer look at the Russian military posture in the region,²¹ it becomes clear that such allied force deployments to the Baltic States and Poland, even together with indigenous forces, are far from sufficient for offensive operations against Russia, but are quite adequate as a deterrent against Russian aggression. In the current confrontational situation, Russia likes nothing more than seeing what it is the allies hate to do or refrain from doing.

Finally, it is true that deployments of troops and materiel on such a scale to the Baltic States and Poland are rather expensive and may not happen overnight. However, that is not a good reason for doing nothing. Respective decisions should be taken soon (once again, the moment of truth by the end of 2015 and early 2016 will be indicative) in order to allow the deployments to be made at the latest by the end of 2016 or early 2017 (bearing in mind that Russia's next major exercise, *Zapad*, will probably be held in late summer 2017). NATO military planners can surely cope with such a task, if and when the political decisions are taken. Maintaining brigades at home, let's say in Germany or France, is also costly, perhaps more so than while located in the Baltic Sea area. That would be particularly true if the Baltic States and Poland were ready to devote sufficient financial resources from their defence budgets for Host Nation Support purposes. I'm sure that Baltic and Polish governments will make the effort to build the infrastructure necessary to accommodate and train the allied forces over a longer period of time. The deployment of a few land brigades and air force squadrons a few hundred kilometres further east within NATO territory using European infrastructure is nothing compared to the immense effort made by the allies in Afghanistan.

¹ At the beginning of September 2015, Gazprom and its European partners (E.ON, BASF/Wintershall, OMV, ENGIE and Royal Dutch Shell) signed a shareholders' agreement on the Nord Stream-2 gas pipeline project that would double the capacity of lines 1 and 2, and take the same route. The new pipelines are due to start transporting gas by the end of 2019. The cost of the project is up to €9.9 billion for the third and fourth pipelines to transport up to an additional 55 billion cubic meters of gas per year.

<http://www.euractiv.com/sections/energy/germany-helps-russia-bypass-ukraine-nord-stream-2-317340>

² <https://aleklett.wordpress.com/2014/10/25/the-baltic-sea-is-of-increasing-importance-for-russia/>

³ http://www.ccb.se/documents/Nationalreport_RUSSIA.pdf

⁴ <http://eastbook.eu/en/2013/07/material-en/news-en/why-kaliningrad-hasnt-transformed-into-the-singapore-of-russia/>

⁵ E.g. in the case of Estonia: <http://estonia.eu/about-estonia/economy-a-it/economy-in-numbers.html>

⁶ Especially considering a frontal attack on Poland and/or cutting the Baltic States away from the rest of NATO.

⁷ Anniversary of the notorious Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact signed in 1939 between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, which paved the way for the outbreak of WWII and the occupation of Poland and the Baltic States.

⁸ <http://www.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/218208.Polish-President-Duda-visits-Estonia->

⁹ <http://www.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/eesti/president-ilves-poolal-on-keskne-roll-meie-regiooni-julgeolekuhuvide-eest-seismisel?id=72269959>

¹⁰ Poland and Estonia maintain defence expenditure close to or even exceeding 2% of GDP, while Latvia and Lithuania, who meanwhile almost halved their defence budgets, have pledged to achieve the 2% target in a few years.

¹¹ Aerial incursions and simulation of attacks, including nuclear ones, mini-submarine spying and provocations, harassment of scientific ships etc.

¹² http://www.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/valismaa/soome-president-niinisto-meil-ei-ole-mingit-kohustust-balti-riike-kaitstva-hakata?id=72289691&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+delfi+uudised+%28DELFI+%3E+K%C3%B5ik+uudised%29

¹³ http://yle.fi/uutiset/thursdays_papers_erroneous_quote_black_list_opening_hours_and_full_centres/8257533

¹⁴ <http://www.icds.ee/blog/article/a-swedish-about-face-on-nato/>

¹⁵ <http://maailm.postimees.ee/3302791/rootsi-kaitseminister-soovib-tihendada-sojalist-koostood-usaga>

¹⁶ <http://www.thelocal.dk/20141031/russia-simulated-a-military-attack-on-denmark>

¹⁷ Common Security and Defence Policy of the European Union.

¹⁸ <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/moscows-moves-syria-5-messages-russia-sending-the-world-13823>

¹⁹ <http://breakingdefense.com/2015/09/russians-closed-the-gap-for-a2ad-air-force-gen-gorenc/>

²⁰ <http://www.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/valismaa/ajaloolane-soome-voib-sattuda-korragnii-venemaa-kui-ka-nato-vaenlaseks?id=72421199>

²¹ In the Kaliningrad oblast and the main bulk of Russia's Western Military District, especially the areas in the immediate vicinity of Norway, Finland, Estonia and Latvia (and counting Belarus as a military extension of Russia).